

Briefing Notes +

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Are there really 3.6 million refugees in Turkey or could there be considerably less?

Franck Düvell, Head of Migration Department

SUMMARY

- Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, at least 984,500 Syrians have left Turkey back to Syria, the EU or other countries.
- So far, the Syrian refugee verification process only identified 2.7 million individuals. Hence, almost one million could not (yet) be verified.
- It is estimated, that there are between 2.7 million to no more than 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. This is considerably less than the currently assumed 3.65 million.

Introduction

Famously, Turkey claims hosting over 3.6 million Syrian refugees, largely permitted under the country's temporary protection legislation ([DGMM 2019](#)). So far, this number is also replicated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR 2019](#)) and many other stakeholders. This implies that the country hosts the largest refugee population worldwide and the government claims to being the champion of refugee protection in the region and globally. However, there are reasons to doubt this number and query the claims made. Notably, whilst the situation is hugely volatile and such fluid movements difficult to monitor there are also significant flaws in the way these figures are generated.

The influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey

From 2011, following the beginning of the 'Arab Spring' and specifically the revolution in Syria and the subsequent backlash by the Assad regime an influx of refugees from Syria has been recorded in Turkey. Whilst in 2012, 14,237 Syrians were registered in Turkey this rose to 1.5 million in 2014 and 3.66 million in 2019. This number also includes 415,000 Syrian babies born in Turkey (Mr Ayaz, head of DGMM, in [Hurriyet Daily News 20/6/2019](#)), hence only 3.2 million migrated from Syria.

Syrians are not evenly dispersed across the country but concentrated in a few provinces; irregular movements within the country, as to Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara further reinforces this pattern.

Table 1: Registered Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
14.237	224.665	1.519.286	2.503.549	2.834.441	3.426.786	3.623.192	3.658.250*

* As per 5/9/2019

Source [DGMM 2019](#)

The politics and governance of Syria refugee protection in Turkey

The issue of Syrian refugees as well as refugee statistics are a sensitive and politicised issue. From the very beginning of the crisis the Turkish government maintained an open border policy and welcomed Syrians as ‘guests’. On the one hand, Turkey presented herself to the world, and specifically to the Arab world as true protector of the ‘umma’, the Muslim community (e.g. [Daily Sabah 20/4/2017](#)), to the international community as the champion of refugee protection and to the EU as the country that contains what could become yet another large-scale influx of refugees (see president Erdogan’s latest statement, [Spiegel Online, 5/9/2019](#)). The numbers are also an important argument in negotiating with the EU and its member states some international (including financial) support. On the other hand, more recently, based on the public attitude that there are ‘too many’ Syrians refugees have become an increasingly contentious issue in Turkey (see [Centre for Turkish Studies, 4/7/2019](#)) and the AK Party as well as the CHP aim to enhance control over the issue and also to bring the numbers down locally and nationally. This is achieved by removing Syrians and others from Istanbul ([Istanbul Governor, 22/7/2019](#)), deporting some back to Syria and contemplating about voluntary return policies.

Only from 2006, Turkey began modernising its migration regime. First, it set up two agencies, the Bureau for Integrated Border Management and the Bureau for Migration Management. The latter then prepared a modern legislation which only came into force in 2014, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. Simultaneously, the law regulated a new authority, the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM). Initially, this consisted of an improvised office in Ankara with around 400 staff, many young university recruits. It took several years to also prepare some secondary legislation, roll out the DGMM and set up branches across the country (see [IOM 2018](#) for this paragraph). The DGMM by its mandate holds a kind of monopoly over all migration matters including migration data and protects these stringently.

This sketch demonstrates that Turkey faced the largest refugee influx in its history whilst a modern migration management regime was still in the making. Notably, the influx coincided with the setting up of a registration system. During the first years, whilst there were still no DGMM branches, called Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMMs), in the provinces a UNHCR sponsored project sent mobile DGMM stations, converted lorries, to the relevant provinces to register Syrian refugees. These were provided with ID cards which facilitated access to public services. However, registration also implied that Syrians like other refugees were confined to the province where they were residing and not permitted to move to other parts of the country. However, a certain proportion of refugees disobey these restrictions and relocate to other cities irregularly.

This initial process did not envisage a continuous system of controls or de-registration procedures (see Düvell, Corabati and Soyusen 2015). This means that those who first registered in Turkey but

subsequently returned to Syria, for instance, after Daesh was beaten or who moved on to the EU were not systematically taken off the system. Therefore, the emerging statistics de facto largely represent the cumulative number of registrations and not actually the number of individuals in the country. Also, some recent research (Duvell and Sagioglu 2019) suggests that around 8-12 per cent of the Syrians who left their city of first registration to irregularly move to other cities registered there again, most possibly under another name. Therefore, it is all but certain how many Syrians there are actually in Turkey and where they reside. Unfortunately, no Turkish, UN (IOM, UNHCR) or EU actor has as yet been signalling any issues with these statistics.

So, what is the real number of Syrian refugees in Turkey?

From October 2016, the DGMM, jointly with the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD) and again with support of the UNHCR, rolled out a verification or re-registration scheme ([TR World 14/11/2017](#), [UNHCR no date](#)). Syrians are issued a new ID card facilitating access to public services. The scheme is funded by the EU as part of the financial support under the March 2016 EU-Turkey statement. This time, also biometric data is collected. Still, the website of the DGMM shows that by 1 August 2019 there were 3,643,870 Syrians in Turkey ([DGMM 2019](#)). On 28. August the figure stood at 3,657,694, hence, numbers are currently slowly increasing by 13,824 or around 3,500 persons per week.

However, from 2014 to 2019, 1,236,678 people moved on irregularly to Greece; of these around 616,000 were Syrians. Since the verification began in October 2016, 111,678 persons have arrived in Greece coming from Turkey, including around 25,000 Syrians. A certain though unknown proportion of these Syrians will have been registered in Turkey; a non-representative study found that in 2015 54 per cent of all Syrians who arrived in Greece had spent more than one month in Turkey, 44 per cent more than 4 months, of whom many had registered with the authorities ([MedMig 2019](#)).

Further to this, the Minister of Interior claims that 339,000 refugees have already returned to Syria ([TRT World, 26/5/2019](#)). However, there are huge uncertainties over the scope of return migration; for instance, the [UNHCR \(2019\)](#) monitored only 62,439 returns up to date implying there are also unmonitored returns. Finally, a small number of refugees have been resettled to third countries, 21,580 from 2017 to 2017 ([UNHCR 2018](#)) and another 8,100 in 2018 ([UNHCR 2019](#)). Since these have left through official channels, they seem to be the only ones who have accordingly been deregistered. There are no figures on Syrian refugees deceased in Turkey. On the other hand, there are uncertainties about the scope of recent irregular arrivals, notably since the commencing attack of the Syrian government and its supporting Russia forces on Idlib province where an estimated 3 million people are 'caught in crossfire' ([The Guardian, 24/8/2019](#)). Recently, irregular arrivals have increased, the authorities apprehend on average 500 persons per day and it can be assumed that at least another 500 escape detection and make it to Turkey. Thus, up to 15,000 Syrians enter Turkey irregularly every month, 60,000 since the attack on Idlib commenced in May ([TRT, 18/5/2019](#)). This could result in an increase of irregular Syrian refugees who are not (yet) registered in Turkey.

Meanwhile, the UNHCR ([UNHCR 2019a](#)) reported that by the end of 2018 only 1.75 million Syrians under temporary protection could be verified. By 15 February 2019, this had increased to 'over 2.7 million' ([UNHCR 2019b](#)). Meanwhile, under the EU funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) schemes 1,545,674 ESSN and 487,089 CCTE or a total of just over 2 million beneficiaries were recorded as of February 2019 ([Asylum Information Database, 19/4/2019](#)). The [UNHCR,\(2019\)](#) states '96 per cent of the verification target across Turkey'

had been achieved. In the meantime, however, Syrians continued to leave the country also distorting these new figures.

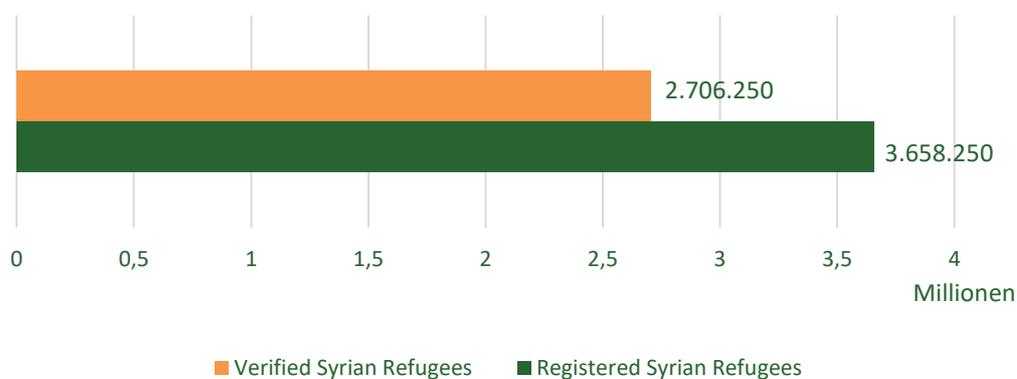
A possible formula for an estimation could be: Registered Syrian Refugees in Turkey (RSRT) – ½ of Transit Migrants to EU (TMUE) – Returned Syrian Refugees (RSR) – Multiple Registered Syrian Refugees (MRSR) + Recently Arrived Unregistered Syrian Refugees (RAUSR). Hence, RSTR 3.658.250 – ½ TMUE 308,000 – 339,000 – 365,000 + RAUSR 60,000 = 2,706,250. In any case, the [2018 UNHCR](#) document suggests that the latest figure of 2.7 million released in February by the UNHCR could be near the real number of Syrians in Turkey, in other word, the presence of a quarter of the Syrians registered under the temporary protection scheme could not be verified. To this one would need to add an unknown number of unregistered and thus irregular Syrians in Turkey, notably in the southern provinces.

Table 2: Verification of Syria refugees in Turkey

2016	2017	2018	2019
n.a.	529.000	1.750.000	2.700.000

UNHCR [2017](#), [2019a](#), [2019b](#)

Figure 1: Registered versus verified Syrian refugees in Turkey



Policy implications

On the one hand, this could be an embarrassment for the authorities though it must be acknowledged that such a mobile population is hard to administer, even Germany in 2015 got the numbers of arrivals wrong due to the double counting of arrivals in different records. On the other hand, if true this downward correction of the number of Syrian refugees in the country would also have rather positive implications. For instance, based on the number of registered Syrian children it was always concluded that only around 65 per cent are in education whereas the proportion of children not in education could be up to 35 per cent. Now, if the total number would be considerably less, the proportion of children not in education would also be considerably lower (there are a

registered 1.15 million children between 5-18, if this number is 25 per cent lower the total would be 868,000 and given that 650,000 are enrolled at school (number provided to author by Ministry for Education) this is at least a 75 per cent enrolment rate). The same would apply to the proportion of Syrians receiving emergency cash payment, not only 41 per cent but 55 per cent would benefit from these.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that by the end of 2018 the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey including the children born to Syrian refugees in Turkey was considerably lower, around 2.7 to 2.8 million, than the commonly claimed 3.65 million. In fact, given that 415,000 Syrian children born in Turkey the number of Syria-born Syrians could even be only around 2.3 million. Since January, notably, since the unfolding of yet another crisis in Idlib due to the offensive of the Regime and Russian forces a fresh influx has been noted. Observers in the field suggest that many do or did not yet register with the authorities. Therefore, numbers have been increasing again and could now be in the region of 3 million.

In this light all numbers disseminated by Turkish sources or international organisations so far seem flawed or even grossly misleading. Apart from the administrative challenges to monitor highly mobile populations Turkey has her own national and international interests for playing out supposedly higher numbers. However, from international organisations mandated to advocate refugee matters one would expect impartial monitoring and reporting; there is no good reason why international actors failed to provide a kind of health warning but instead replicated these figures without further critical examination.

In any case, Turkey would still be the top refugee hosting country in the world, followed by Pakistan with 1.4 million refugees ([UNHCR 2019](#)) but the perceived 'migration pressure' from Syrians in Turkey would be considerably less whilst the challenge of Syrian refugee integration in Turkey and the associated costs would be considerably smaller and thus more manageable. Any such estimates must still be treated with some caution as it is based in various assumptions and uncertainties. The hope is that this paper triggers a debate and fresh calculations in order to establish an accurate scope of this social problem so that policies can be adjusted to reality. In any case, EU and international organisations would be well advised to seek clarifications on this matter.

Reference

This analysis builds on a previous technical assistance project funded by the EU from 2014-2015, 'Comprehensive Assessment Study on Mapping of Sources and Key Trends of International Migration in Turkey' which assessed the availability and quality of population and migration data and the capacity of migration governance in Turkey, see FWC BENEFICIARIES 2013 - LOT 7 "Governance and Home Affairs" - EuropeAid/132633/C/SER/multi, Technical Assistance for Comprehensive Assessment Study on Mapping Sources and Key Trends of International Migration in Turkey, Contract N° ALTUN/TAAIM/TR2010/0740.01-2/FWC/006, Final Report, 14 September 2015, Franck Düvell, Servet Soyuzen and Metin Çorabatır.

This analysis also is an off-spring of a recent project 'Migrationsaspirationen von syrischen Flüchtlingen in der Türkei vor dem Hintergrund ihrer familiären Situation' conducted at the German

Centre for Integration and migration Research (DeZIM-Institute) from 10/2018 – 10 2019 by Franck Duvell, Zafer Sagioglu and Martin Petersen-Lemberg.

The author

Franck Duvell, PhD, is head of the migration department at the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) in Berlin. Until 2018, he was senior researcher and associate professor at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford where he still is a research associate. He is also convener of the Turkey Migration Studies Network (TurkMiS). For over 20 years he studies irregular, transit and refugee migration in the neighbourhood of the EU and specifically in Turkey.

IMPRESSUM

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Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (DeZIM-Institut)

German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM-Institute)

Mauerstraße 76
10117 Berlin

+49 (0)30 804 928 93

info@dezim-institut.de

www.dezim-institut.de

Directors

Prof. Dr. Naika Foroutan, Prof. Dr. Frank Kalter

Author

Franck Düvell, Head of Migration Department

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